DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 219 774 CS 207 107

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TITLE An Honorable Seduction: Thematic Studies in Literature.
PUB DATE [80]
NOTE 11p.

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Course Content; Course Descriptions; English Curriculum; English Instruction; Higher Education; *Literature Appreciation; *Student Attitudes; *Student Interests; Teaching Methods; *Thematic Approach

ABSTRACT

By using a thematic approach and by drawing on other disciplines for breadth, English teachers can "honorably seduce" career-oriented students into a love affair with literature and draw them back into the English curriculum. For example, a teacher's conversation with a student focusing on fathers and sons led the teacher to suggest that the student read Kafka's "Letter to My Father," after which the student read Hess's "Siddhartha," Turgenev's "Fathers and Sons," Roethke's "My Papa's Waltz," and other works concerning the father/son relationship. Another teacher introduced a student who was interested in psychiatric nursing to works by Virginia Woolf and Sylvia Plath and to other works containing suicidal characters. An entire course that used as its theme the dilemma of the artist in society involved extensive discussions, a variety of readings, and a number of short papers for each of the readings. The course concluded with an opportunity for students to respond to a particular work through dance, art, poetry, or reading aloud. Meanings in literature are not embedded in the work independent of individual interpretation. The importance of reader response, then, supports the notion of structuring literature around thematic units. (HTH)

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AN HONORABLE SEDUCTION:

THEMATIC STUDIES IN LITERATURE

Diane Z. Worby

Let's face it: it's getting more and more difficult to fill up these literature sections. We sit at registration waiting for that eager face, that hungry student, counting the names on the American Lit I survey course list, hoping it will fill, so that we can teach at least one lit course in addition to our comp courses (or even skills courses). It would be so good to do The Scarlet Letter. But with most colleges requiring only one year of English for career tract students, and that requirement being satisfied by two semesters of composition, our hopes become dimmer each semester. In fact, Alan M. Hollingsworth, in his Presidential address to the Association of Departments of English, claimed that:

> A somewhat less widely shared knowledge of our troubles consists of the phenomenon of failed, or failing, departments of English. Perhaps this knowledge is less widely shared simply because no one has bothered to establish in print a profile of a typical department in extremis, . . . Nevertheless, certain characteristics of deeply troubled English departments are not at all mysterious. . . If less than one-third of all sections taught in the fall term are literature sections, then the curriculum, students, and faculty are probably in serious trouble.

The English major is a rarity. Jobhunting Ph.D.'s in English are studying that excellent publication "What Can You Do With a Degree in English." Fewer and fewer beginning college students are choosing this concentration. Too, the 1970's have brought, according to all recent studies, a renaissance of career-minded 18 and 19 year olds. If they are in college at all, they are in for a purpose, and are studying occupational therapy assistance, human services, business, technologies, police science. At the four year schools, a parallel exists: there students study accounting,

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pre-law, business, hotel management. There are few anthropology, archeology, philosophy or literature majors around. They've heard, from those who studied these subjects in the sixties that there's just no work out there. Gone is the student studying liberal arts for its own sake. Gone are the filled sections of World Lit, English Lit, American Lit, even Women in Lit. Those two semesters of comp are all the career-minded student needs and wants. And besides, literature is scary, irrelevant; poetry is still scarier. Students cringe as they remember those classes in which line scanning and meter were called poetry. All that symbolism to untangle. All those figures of speech to memorize. All that hidden meaning that was never seen.

And yet, we who have been there, we who have read and studied, we who revere the word, know what goodies are concealed in a fine novel, a special short story, a powerful poem that can reveal our lives to us in 8 or 10 lines. The impasse, however, is not impassable. There is a way to make literature less marginal to career students. There is a way to seduce a student, honorably, into a love affair with literature, an affair that might last a lifetime. Using a theme, and drawing on other disciplines for breath, I have "seduced" many a reluctant reader to a discovery, or a rediscovery of literature, even poetry. When the course work is over, and the student has found those universal truths, characters, insights, that ability to respond intelligibly from within his/her own sensibility (reader response!), the seduction is complete: literature becomes a way to learn about the self; books are no longer feared; students ask me, at the end, to give them a list of really good books to read, because they want to continue.

Perhaps it is time to re-examine the way literature has been taught for the past hundred years. Why, indeed, have we clung to survey courses, covering a thousand years of English literature in one semester, for example, all contained in a mammoth and overwhelming-looking text, with tissue thin pages, double columns of tiny and almost illegible print, heavy, bulky, dragged to class, - really dull looking. (Would you like to read through the Norton Anthology of English Literature?) What, indeed, has been so sacred about studying literature the way we have, through survey courses in American, English, and World Literature? The crisis in literacy, and by that I mean the crisis in attracting students to literature courses, must be faced. It is time to make literature less marginal to all students.

Looking out at the faces of my students one year, I saw: JOHN P., a man of about thirty, who had worked for the telephone company for ten years. His major was telecommunications marketing, and he was "shopping" for the required liberal arts. Somehow we got to the idea of fathers and sons, and he talked a bit about his father, and then about his two sons. The idea for a course popped into my head, and I suggested that he go home and read Kafka's poignant Letter to My Father. I knew he would be caught in this simply written, but complex tale of a troubled father-son relationship. The rest was easy. He read Siddhartha, Gide's "The Prodigal Son," Turgenev's Fathers and Sons, Herbert Gold's Fathers, Dylan Thomas's famous "Do Not Go Gentle Into that Dark Night," Theodore Roethke's "My Papa's Waltz," - the poetry was central to the student, had meaning, needed no iambic pentameter analysis. It was simply and gorgeously about grown men remembering their dead fathers. ("So how

come I can understand this poetry," one commented, and "I always used to hate poetry because I never knew what it meant." Could it be because reading around a theme that he was connected to gave all of his readings more meaning, made all of his readings more comprehensible?)

MARY W. was a nursing student, a "scientific type," young, living at home with her parents. I sensed at a brief meeting that she would not enjoy literature as literature, that she had a disciplined mind that tended toward scientific structures, and that unless I used some "intellectual seduction," she would be lost to literature. She was fresh out of a psychology course in which she had studied Maslow's theory of self-actualization, and we/I began to explore this theme in literature. Book led to book, we looked for characters who reached actualization and those who did not; we added more Maslow, slotted literature into his hierarchy of needs, synthesizing the two, and arrived, finally, at Mary's study: she would super-impose Maslow's hierarchy of needs on her small three page analysis of each book, tracing the actualization, or failure to actualize of each character. Her scientific mind, which would have eschewed a "straight" study of literature, was stimulated. This was something she wanted to do. This was something she could do. This was no symbol hunt (What does the green light at the end of the dock in Gatsby symbolize, she remembered being asked, hating every moment of the course!) Serendipitously, a study of others' struggles for self-actualization led this young woman to some profound realizations of her own life.

SHERYL S. was another nursing student, who was interested in psychiatric nursing. In a placement, she was working at a mental

health complex with suicidal patients, and wanted to learn more about suicides. Reading deCrevecouer, Hawthorne, Melville, Poe, would have been anathema to her; in fact, she would not have registered for a traditional literature course. But how excited she was to study the biography and two novels of Virginia Woolf. Some poetry, biographical information, and The Bell Jar of Sylvia Plath. And then how interested she was to read Virginia Woolf's letters, Plath's Letters Home, (books she never would have read otherwise), Alvarez's The Savage God, and, as a result of this reading, to draw up a profile of the suicidal candidate, which she then utilized in analyzing Woolf and Plath, and the people with whom she worked. (Still another serendipitous outcome was the student's new-found love affair with Virginia Woolf.)

TOM O. was a mature returning student, who worked as a director of group living at a home for children, and whose major was human services. Through discussion about the children he worked with on a daily basis, it became clear that they were all homeless, and/or parentless. Literature is filled with just such children (Tom Sawyer, Huck Finn, Great Expectations, Oliver Twist, James's The Turn of the Screw, Elie Wiesel's Gates of the Forest). The student was delighted with the idea of reading about the literary counterparts of the youngsters with whom he worked, and the papers he wrote incorporated his own experience in dealing with children with his interpretation of the moral,ethical, emotional, and physical growth of the literary hero/heroine. The reading and the papers proved to be discoveries of literature, psychology, and life, and the student completed his study with a rich background in classic literature.

MARLENE O. wants to continue for a bachelor's degree in business,

and has a part-time position with a large local corporation. Although she was only twenty years old at the time, she was already thinking like a businesswoman, and her interests were limited to business. Would she want to read Chaucer, Langland, Mallory? She would have struggled through them, - probably would have dropped the course. But American literature is full of novels of business: the growth of larger industries, the images of mama and papa stores, struggling salespeople, failures, successes. William Dean Howells's The Rise of Silas Lapham; Frank Norris's The Pit; Upton Sinclair's The Jungle; Theodore Dreiser's The Financier; Sinclair Lewis's Babbitt; Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman; Ayn Rand's Atlas Shrugged, Bernard Malamud's The Assistant; Joseph Heller's Something Happened: all are novels of the business experience. Being an employee of a large corporation gave the student particular insight into the successes, failures, and plights of business men and women in all the novels she read. Her papers integrated, as often as possible, her own knowledge and experience and interest in business with the problems presented in the fiction, and, incidentally but of course, she loved the study. But these are enough profiles, enough case studies.

Let us walk through the construction of such a course, and the potential for growth for the student and the teacher. Most colleges have graphic arts programs, and most artists must enroll, reluctantly or not, in an English course; at some schools, two years of English are required. The most exciting course I gave was "The Dilemma of the Artist in Society: A Literary Reflection." Let me describe what happened. The course was filled, first of all, with not only aspiring artists, but some aspiring actors and actresses, and some aspir-

ing writers as well. The title of the course was indeed an honorable seduction: within the first day of registration, the course was filled, and a roomful of eager students, closet creators, was a happy sight. (No last minute panic over less-than-full registration, no fear of cancelled class, no loitering at drop-add looking for three more students so that the course can go.) Excitement was in the air. We began with questions: Does the artist create for her/his own sake or for society? How can the artist exist in a society which reveres the work ethic, money, industry? What responsibility, if any, does society owe to the artist? How does each artist deal with his/her muse or daemon? What is the nature of creativity? Has the artist suffered from political, economic, social, or gender repression? All were drawn into heated discussions which we returned to time and again throughout the study. The reading list was distributed. Wordsworth's "Intimations of Immortality," in which he mourns the passing of his imagination but rediscovers his powers, became an awesome discovery for students. Not only did they identify with the feelings, but they understood the poetry. Tennyson's "Palace of Art" reminded them that other artists too had struggled with the need for isolation in order for their creativity to flower. They were reassured to discover that Tennyson too asserted his need to be an earthly being in order to create, but that he wanted to keep his pristine and quiet "palace" as well. And when they read of Bartleby's refusal to be America's copier, these students understood with absolute clarity his self-imposed isolation, his eventual death, his preference not to "buy into America's system," as one student put it, his powerful demurral, that ringing "I prefer not to." Ibsen's Master Builder was next, and they were intrigued with Solness, his creation and his des-

truction, his terror of upcoming young architects, and his lack of ability to be generative, to share his talents with these young builders and learners. Of course we read Virginia Woolf's To the Lighthouse next, and balanced Lily Briscoe's talent in painting against Mrs. Ramsay's talent in living. And of course we read A Room of One's Own, by Woolf, and then Tillie Olsen's new Silences, both of which speak to the particular problems women have faced in their creative lives over the centuries. The favorite book, though , was Heinrich Böll's The Clown; one student was going to be late for class, and called and begged me not to begin the discussion before he arrived. They understood so thoroughly Hans Schnier's statement, "I am a clown, I collect moments," and they understood his choice, at the end, to be a street clown rather than compromise his art.

For this course I drew up a list of questions for each of the readings, and students wrote small papers (3 to 5 pages) in response to these questions. They had to work in the library for some of these, since secondary source material was necessary for a full understanding, and so library skills and usage became a valuable part of the learning. There is much new research and writing on reader response; these readers responded, as they had to, as artists who felt their primal sympathies in connection with protagonists. We were not discarding or ignoring the use of language, the setting, symbols, historical frameworks, but we were focusing more strongly on reader response: who is the Solness in their lives? The Bartleby? The Oscar Wilde? What is being told? To whom, and to what end? Who is telling it, and how? How is the writer achieving his/her points? How does the writer make the reader want to keep reading? What is the significance, relevance, of this work for me? At the end of the study, I suggested that students might want to use their own particular creativity

in responding, through dance, art, poetry, reading aloud, to the experience of the learnings. This was the most exciting outcome. They shared, at a final get together, their collages, poems on their own creativity, short stories, paper machier representations, and explained the meaning of what they had done, and how their product was related to the specific questions raised in and by the group.

All of this connects, in some primary way, with some of the newer theories of literary criticism, and in particular, Reader Response, or the School of Reception Aesthetics. According to Stanley Fish (Surprised by Sin: The Reader in Paradise Lost, 1967), it is the reader's experience of literature that is crucial. Meanings in literature are not embedded in a work independent of individual interpretation; they are instead, created through "particular reading acts and interpretive strategies during the reader's moment to moment experience of the text." Fish suggests that the informed reader (here, one who is reading literature that is thematically consonant with his/her life or works or passions), creates meanings through particular reading acts and interpretive strategies during the reader's moment to moment experience of the text. This new-old way of thinking about literature and thinking about the act of reading is in sharp contrast to the objective, formalist, structuralist criticism of the New Critics, who focused on the text; rather, the meaning of the text, in the Reader Response school, is located in the consciousness of the reader because of the experiential nature of the reading process. It is the reader's ingestion, or internalization, or reception of the text that defines the consciousness present in the act of reading.

Still another critic of the Reader Response School, Norman Holland (Five Readers Reading, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975),

suggests that the reader transforms the materials literature or reality offers, projecting fantasies into them, and making these fantasies into themes, or meanings, which are authentic aspects of identity to the reader. "Interpretation is a function of identity," claims Holland.

Reader Response, then, supports the notion of literature being gathered into themes that mirror a consciously, or unconsciously held desire.

It was Gertrude Stein who complained "How come my contemporaries are never my contemporaries," feeling that, as an artist, she was always fifty years ahead of other people then living. Different complaints have been lodged, periodically, against education, suggesting that education too is fifty years behind peoples' lives and needs. It is clear that our students are different students, that they are studying different things, that they live and have lived in a media generation, that they have "tuned out" and "turned off" on literature, and that if we are to bring them back, to teach them, to seduce them to reading again, we must change our course structures. Thematic studies in literature are sound, purposeful, and honorable.